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ABSTRACT

Most school consolidations have exercised a plan, but few have followed up with an evaluation. This report provides a history of consolidation in Ohio and a follow-up study of the last school consolidation to take place in Ohio in 1992. The study, conducted in 2000, included a survey of teachers, parents, and students to determine the success of the consolidation and the feelings of those involved 8 years later. When asked in 1992 if the consolidation were good for everyone, 11 of the 13 teachers responding to the survey offered a positive response. The same response was offered 8 years later. Fifty-eight parents (78 percent) surveyed in 1992 expressed satisfaction with the consolidation. The same number were still pleased with the arrangement 8 years later. Also, 60 percent of parents believed their children enjoyed school after the consolidation. Those who responded with written comments were very positive about the consolidation. Additionally, superintendents of the smallest school districts in the state were surveyed to get a sense of what they were thinking about consolidation. They did not appear to be concerned with the issue of consolidation. (Contains 1 table and 23 references.) (WFA)

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A Post-Consolidation Evaluation - The Effects Eight Years Later

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Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association,

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Abstract

Every state has been involved in school district consolidation during the last century. School consolidation requires planning and evaluation. Most consolidations have utilized a plan, but few have followed-up with an evaluation. This paper provides a history of consolidation in Ohio and is a follow-up study of the last school consolidation to take place in Ohio. It reports what the people involved have to say eight years after the consolidation. The results of this study are especially important for educators facing consolidation. The superintendents of the smallest school districts in the state were surveyed to get a sense of what small districts are thinking about consolidation in 2000.

Background

Education often adopts business and management models. Taylor's (1945) model of efficiency and Deming's (1986) TQM model are effectively used in education.

It is not surprising that the concept of school consolidation, a technique used in education extensively during the last century, came from the early 19th century industrial era. According to Fanning (1995), "Economy of scale" is an idea where one reduces production cost by increasing the size of the operation. School systems base their organizational structure on this idea. The need for efficiency and improved quality of education contribute to the idea of school consolidation. School consolidations occurred throughout the United States in large numbers during the 20th century, as a result of the efficiency model created by industry.

Consolidation in the United States

As early as 1930, the U.S. Department of Education published a pamphlet with detailed information from 105 consolidated schools. This early publication cited several reasons for considering school consolidation: increasing demand on the school, state encouragement, opportunities for students, and efficiency. Studies in this area included discussions on teacher training, valuations and incomes, school grounds, types of organization, and sources and amounts of revenue (Shreve, 1989).

A study of rural and small school consolidation (Link 1971) reports that societal changes, technology, and increasing student needs are the causes of school consolidations. The study suggests that school district consolidation is an alternative to small, inefficient schools for the successful accomplishment of educational goals. Reference is also made to the fact that the responsibility for successful school consolidation rests with the superintendent and board of

education. Consolidation presents many unique challenges. The plan should include the identification of needs, goals, and objectives; the establishment of procedures; and some form of evaluation or feedback. The educational needs must be combined with the needs of the community. The keys to success in school district consolidation are planning, communication, and community involvement according to Moray (1985) in a report on easing the transition.

Benton (1992) reports on the success of a consolidation in six small towns in South Nevada County, Arkansas. This consolidation is based primarily on the lack of resources. The significance of this review is the fact that in a follow-up study three years after the consolidation there are positive reports on academic achievement especially on the secondary level. Benton's report mirrors the procedure as described by Morey in 1985.

North Dakota is a state which saw a decline in school districts from 256 to 156 between 1970-94. During the last five years of this period North Dakota eliminated 22 school districts. In this instance a follow-up between 1991 and 1999 reveals the communities, which lost their schools, saw a decline in people's involvement in community organizations as well as a loss of business (Post and Stambach, 1999).

The state of Illinois offered financial incentives for school district consolidation (Hall and Arnold 1993). A state law in Massachusetts provides for more generous funding to reorganized school systems. During 1991, in Massachusetts, approximately 30 districts contacted the state education department about the possibility of joining another school district (Diegmueller 1991).

Studies endorsed by the state department of education in Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan show that advantages of consolidation greatly outweigh the disadvantages. Consolidated districts provide students, especially those at the secondary level,

with a broader curriculum, more opportunities and improved quality. Teachers benefit from increased salaries and benefits and more opportunities for professional development. Consolidated districts provide taxpayers with more efficient systems of education (Hall and Arnold).

Fanning (1995) reports that forces such as technological, economic changes and culture are at work in most consolidations. He suggests that school improvement is often expressed in economic terms rather than curricular or achievement terms. The effects on achievement especially at the secondary level are tied to the community and the culture. He found that to be especially true in agricultural communities.

Nelson (1995) found that consolidated schools can offer an expanded curriculum and a more prominent identity in the community. Bigger schools provide a wider range of curricular and extra curricular offerings. Since most extra curricular offerings are at the secondary level, consolidation appears to be an advantage for high school students. There are several liabilities of consolidation. These include more red tape; less participation in teacher disconnectivity; more time directed to discipline problems and less parent involvement..

Brantly (1983) reports on the consolidation of high schools. By combining high schools the district was able to increase the curricular offerings and provide more opportunities for students.

Consolidation in Ohio

Ohio has a long history of school district consolidation. All of the consolidations in Ohio took place during an 88 year period of time between 1914 and 1992. The first mention of consolidation in Ohio is contained in a letter written by S.K. Mardis, a state school inspector,

included in the Fifty-Eighth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Common Schools to the Governor of the State of Ohio in 1913 which states "The rural schools are greatly in poor condition.... The one-room and one-teacher schools are unable to meet present demands . . . . Many of the small high schools should be abolished.. . . ."(Shreve, p 12). On February 28, 1913, the legislature passed an act providing for a survey of the schools in the state. The survey took place in January, 1914. Two statements in the report are significant regarding consolidation. The first stated, "Too many exceedingly small schools are maintained in the state. Such schools are always expensive and in the main ineffective." The second statement noted, "Consolidation and centralization should be encouraged whenever practical"(Shreve, p 14).

There were 2,674 school districts in Ohio at the close of the 1914-5 school year. During these early years the effectiveness and efficiency of one-room schools became an issue. In 1915 counties considered combining some of these one-room schools to provide for larger schools. Since highway transportation was an issue in these early years, it was logical that county boards of education were created with the direction to move toward more county control and fewer schools. The creation of these county districts was a move toward consolidation (Shreve).

Throughout the 1920's centralization and consolidation of school districts continued resulting in one-room schools being closed and/or becoming part of centralized districts. By 1925 one-room schools shrunk from 9400 to 5500. The stock market crash of 1929 caused even more financial problems for schools, and in 1930 the State Department of Education began to encourage consolidation by disallowing any state funds to schools with less than 14 students. By the 1935-6 school year the number of school districts fell to 1,986, a net loss of 688 districts in twenty years. The new, larger districts provided greater economics with significantly improved

programs.(Shreve, 1989).

The number of districts continued to fall and by the 1940-1 academic year there were 1,696 school districts in the state. In 1953 the real push for consolidation became apparent when House Bill 128 passed in the legislature authorizing a county citizens' committee to be established in each county to study district reorganization. These committees had four years to complete their work. The Ohio School Survey Committee was also formed to study consolidation. After addressing the problem of organization, the committee recommended that districts should operate 12 grades of school by July 1, 1959. This caused the number of districts to dwindle even more and by the 1959-60 school year the number of districts was 984 (Shreve).

As the State Board of Education worked on devising new standards it also encouraged consolidation of districts. This encouragement took the form of setting standards that were difficult or almost impossible for small, inefficient districts to meet. These more stringent standards forced an increase in the number of consolidations and by 1973-4, there were 617 school districts in the state. Between the 1973-4 academic year and the 1987-8 academic year only a few more consolidations occurred in the state (Shreve).

A review of consolidations, which took place since 1988, shows that few districts chose to close their doors in favor of larger more economically feasible districts. Three districts closed at the end of the 1988-9 school year: South Amerist merged with Firelands, Farmington merged with Bristol, and Ohio City merged with VanWert city (J. VanKueren, personal communication, March 15, 1989).

Table 1 RATE OF SCHOOL DISTRICT CLOSURE - OHIO VS. UNITED STATES

Year	#Districts U.S.	%Closure	#District Ohio	%Closure
1935-6	119,001	–	1,936	–
1940-1	117,108	1.6	1,669	13.8
1953-4	63,057	46.1	1,339	19.8
1959-60	40,520	35.7	984	26.5
1973-4	16,730	58.7	617	37.3
1991-2	15,173	9.0	612	.08
1992-3	15,025	.09	611	–
1997-8	14,805	1.5	611	–

Table 1 compares the consolidation rate of Ohio with the entire country. The number of Ohio school districts dropped more rapidly in the years between 1935 and 1944. Ohio closed a smaller percentage of schools than the rest of the nation between 1953 and 1974. Ohio and the nation consolidated schools at about the same rate since 1975. Very few consolidations occurred throughout the entire country in the last twenty years.

The Last Consolidation

In 1991-2 there were 612 school districts in the state. The last consolidation to take place in Ohio occurred at the end of the 1991-2 year when the Mendon-Union Local School District became part of the Parkway Local School District. The Mercer County Board of Education approved the merger following a lengthy study by the people of both districts.

It is important to understand how and why a school district closes. It is hardly like a

business which finds itself losing money and decides it is time to close its doors. The closing of a school involves extensive involvement of people and emotions. As noted in the literature, successful consolidation requires a well-planned procedure.

As superintendent of the Mendon-Union School District I was able to observe and facilitate the entire consolidation process. The Mendon-Union Local School District's enrollment was 287 pupils during the 1991-2 academic year. The district passed a seven mill operating levy in 1992, which provided the district with the funds to operate for another year. The passage of this levy saved the district from consolidating a year sooner than the actual transfer. The struggle for survival of Mendon became more difficult each year.

The only indication of a position by the State Department of Education on consolidation at that time was that it conducted feasibility studies for districts who requested them. The State conducted these studies upon the request of two contingous districts. The purpose of the study was to collect data from each district regarding finances, buildings, curricular offerings, geography, and the community. The state presented the data to both districts so the districts could determine if consolidation was beneficial for both districts. The fact that the State Department of Education conducted these studies indicates that they were promoting consolidation.

A representative from the State Department of Education conducted a feasibility study at the request of the Mendon-Union and Parkway districts during the 1990-91 school year (M. Stahl, personal communication, March 1, 1991). A review of the data in this study shows that geographically and financially Mendon could benefit by becoming part of Parkway. Two major conclusions drawn from the data are that Mendon students could have more educational

opportunities and taxpayers could save tax dollars in both districts. The educational benefits are especially evident in the study at the secondary level. The fact that Mendon students would benefit from more advanced and specialized courses was very important in the study. Even though there was not any pressure from the State, the fear loomed over the Mendon district that someday its size would be its downfall and that the state would force the consolidation. The feasibility study was presented to both boards of education. The Mendon board was somewhat receptive, especially in light of the fact that on the heels of just passing a seven mill levy, the district still faced financial difficulty. As superintendent of Mendon, I observed as the president of the Mendon-Union board of education looked at the study, and almost immediately threw it in the wastebasket. As he did so, he said as he said years earlier, "there will always be a Mendon"(E. Hicks, personal communication, March 7, 1991). Then State Superintendent Franklin B. Walter's words loomed over this issue. He said. "It has to come from the people"(F. Walters, personal communication, November 12, 1990). In the Mendon situation it came from the people.

The fact that Mendon-Union had a plan contributed greatly to the success of the consolidation. Five issues presented to the public were the reasons that the consolidation eventually occurred in 1992. The five issues include low enrollment; finances; adequate curricular and extra curricular offerings especially at the secondary level; people's moods; and the fact that students were being hurt academically. The opportunities in Mendon were not as plentiful as they were in a larger district.

The consolidation process continued with the appointment of a ten-member task force and letters were sent to surrounding school districts to determine their interest in a consolidation with the Mendon district. Two contiguous districts expressed interest in acquiring the entire district

while two others indicated interest in small parts of the district.

The task force conducted meetings, building tours of the other districts, community workshops, transportation studies, and sent newsletters and surveys and continued to plan during the early months of 1992. In the end the Mendon-Union Board voted 2-2, with one Mendon Board member abstaining, because he was teacher in the Parkway District. Absent a recommendation from the Mendon-Union board, the county board conducted its own study and eventually transferred most of the Mendon-Union District to the Parkway District.

The 1992-3 school year began in Ohio with 611 school districts. The creation of a new school district has modified that number. In 2000, by a vote of the people, the State Board of Education created the Monroe Local School District in Butler County. The land is part of the Middletown-Monroe District, the result of a former consolidation. The 2000-1 school year began with 612 school districts in Ohio.(Barton, 2000). These numbers indicate the lack of consolidations after the Mendon-Parkway consolidation over a period of 8 years. The history of school district organization in Ohio reveals a long list of consolidations. The literature, however, fails to give any insight on any follow-up studies on this issue.

Eight years ago the last school district consolidation took place in Ohio; however, consolidations may be a part of the future for school districts in Ohio. It seems prudent to study the Mendon-Union-Parkway consolidation after eight years to determine its success. This may give some guidance for future consolidations throughout the state.

There are five reasons for the consolidation of the Mendon district including size; a narrow curriculum; lack of adequate revenues; attitude of the people; and the lack of benefit for students. To determine if the reasons or problems are solved, I conducted a study in 2000.

Post-Consolidation Evaluation

This study included a two-part survey to determine the success of the consolidation and the status eight years after the fact. The most likely people to include in an evaluation are those who taught in Mendon in 1992. The Mendon-Union School District employed 25 teachers in 1991-2. Seventeen of these teachers became employees of the Parkway District. The remaining were either part-time or left for other positions. Fourteen of these teachers remain in Parkway during the 2000-1 school year. These fourteen teachers received a survey during the fall, 2000. Thirteen of these 14 teachers responded to the survey. The survey contained questions aimed at the five reasons for the consolidation.

First, when the issue of size is considered, it can be broadened to include the professional role of the teacher. By being part of a larger district, these teachers expressed that they grew more professionally since the consolidation. Ten of the 13 teachers felt they grew professionally over the last eight years more than at any other time in their careers. Nine respondents said their teaching careers benefitted by being part of the consolidation. The same nine teachers felt they have more tools for teaching since the consolidation. One of the biggest advantages reported was the fact that teachers have more peers to share ideas with than before. For example, the first grade teacher, is not the only first grade teacher in the building. Now there are three or four to share with. Teachers benefitted financially from this merger and at least two made mention of the salary increases in their survey responses. Although there was only a six hundred dollar salary difference at the base, most of the teachers were at the upper end of the salary schedule in 1992 and received substantial increases in the move. Teachers have higher salaries since the Mendon-Union-Parkway consolidation (T.K. Muhlenkamp, personal communication, January 16, 2001).

When considering size as a reason for the consolidation, one must ask parents and students about the consolidation. Two hundred parents and students received surveys in the fall of 2000. Fifty-eight responded, however, many of those contacted appeared to be reluctant to talk abut the consolidation, yet a majority of the respondents found that the increased activities available to students through extra-curricular activities was a big advantage for the consolidation. Several respondents said they participate in extra-curricular activities, which were not offered and would probably never be offered at Mendon. Football is an added benefit mentioned by many respondents.

A second issue in the merger is curriculum. Concerning curriculum the response from teachers, is overwhelming that the offerings at Parkway, especially at the secondary level, far outweighed the offerings at Mendon. Nine of the 13 teachers feel that they are able to help students more through a broadened curriculum. Three teachers said the curriculum did not make a difference and one teacher marked did not know. Further, 11 of the 13 said Mendon students definitely benefitted over the last eight years as a result of more and better opportunities. Students and parents were less impressed than the teachers with the expanded curriculum, however, most had to admit that they are far better off with additional opportunities.

Teachers are less positive about student success since the consolidation. Six teachers responded that the Mendon students success rate was higher. Three respondents answered no and 4 of the 13 teachers did not know. Teachers did not rate student attitudes about education as much better after the consolidation. In fact they are fairly evenly divided. Five said yes, that attitudes are better while the same number said that they are not better. Three of the 13 respondents answered this question with did not know as their response.

The curriculum is substantially expanded since the consolidation. Secondary students benefitted significantly in this area since the consolidation. In 1992 Mendon-Union offered a total of 39 high school courses. Parkway offered 65 high school courses. During the past eight years Parkway expanded its course offerings and in 2000 they offer 87 high school courses (T.K. Muhlenkamp, personal communication, January 16, 2001). Mendon-Union probably offered the maximum it could ever offer in 1992.

Extra-curricular organizations are more abundant at Parkway. The Mendon-Union District offered students nine organizations in 1992. The Parkway District offered 20 activity organizations. Additionally, students reaped the benefits of an expanded athletic program. Football and wrestling are among the most popular additional opportunities for students.

Third, finances are a major issue in considering the Mendon consolidation. Mendon was headed for serious financial trouble if it maintained the status quo. The tax rate in Mendon was already twenty mills higher than any other district in the county (R.G. Schweiterman, personal communication, November 21, 1992). The owner of a $50,000 house in Mendon paid approximately $753 in property taxes in 1992. The owner of a $50,000 house in the Parkway district in 1992 paid approximately $533 in property taxes (Ohio Department of Taxation, 2001).

The consolidation resulted in a large tax savings for the citizens of the Mendon-Union district. The millage dropped for Mendon-Union residents to 32.12 mills in 1993, the first year following the consolidation. The owner of the $50,000 house in Mendon saw their taxes drop to approximately $548 or a drop of $205 following the consolidation.

Eight years later in 2000, Mendon-Union taxpayers are still paying less than they paid in the final year of existence of the Mendon-Union School District. Since the consolidation the

Parkway district allowed the millage to drop to 24.18 mills in 2000. However, there is a one-percent income tax which passed in 1996. The mix of income tax and property tax makes it difficult to compare the tax receipts in 2000 with those tax receipts in 1992. However, a close approximation is obtained by converting the income tax to property tax millage. The owner of a $50,000 house in Mendon pays $737 in taxes in 2000 when combining property and income taxes. In 1992 that same homeowner paid $753 in taxes. This homeowner is paying $16 less in 2000 than the owner paid in 1992. This is in addition to taxes saved since 1992 (Ohio Department of Taxation).

The citizens of the former Mendon-Union School District benefitted over the past eight years. They get more for their money. There are more educational opportunities for their children and taxpayers are paying less for these advanced opportunities than they paid before the consolidation.

The Mendon-Union district solved its financial problems through consolidation. The finances of the Parkway District following the consolidation are an important part of the success story.

Residents of the Parkway District saw a slight increase in their taxes following the consolidation. This can be attributed to valuation changes as well as some shifting of the inside millage. However, the consolidation helped them over the past eight years in the fact that even with the addition of the voted income tax, their taxes remained fairly constant over the eight years.

The Parkway School District experienced some difficult years financially following the consolidation. The year following the consolidation the combined district was on the

consolidation guarantee. This is a guarantee by the state of Ohio which guarantees that any district which consolidates will not loose any state funds. The remaining district receives state basic aid based either on the new enrollment or they receive the same amount that the districts involved in the consolidation combined received in previous years. The district receives whichever of these amounts is greater for one year. According to the former Parkway treasurer, the district struggled for three years following the consolidation.. The positive is the fact that the district was able to offer more programs for all students with fewer teachers. The former Mendon students helped to fill classes and allowed the Parkway district to offer more courses for all students. The added cost of upkeep of the Mendon building and the increased transportation cost did not, however, help the financial situation (S. Schaffer, personal communication, January 15, 2001). Following some rather lean years, the district was able to recover with the help of state equity money. The Parkway District's state mandated five-year forecast prepared in 2000 projects the district to be financially stable through 2006 (T.K. Muhlenkamp, personal communication, January 16, 2001).

A fourth issue considered by the task force during the Mendon-Parkway consolidation was the mood and attitudes of the people in Mendon. The task force determined in 1992 that a large majority of the people in the Mendon district favored the consolidation. An opinion poll conducted by a group of citizens in the winter of 1992 measured this mood (N. Painter, personal communication, March 14, 1992). The group conducted Interviews with 653 residents of the Mendon community. The study's response rate was 93% with only 46 residents failing to respond. This was over 90% of the people who lived in the district. All of these people favored the consolidation with 77% preferring a consolidation with the Parkway district while 23%

favored Linclolnview. The task force took this as a strong indication that the people were ready to merge the district. Individual conversations with people and the comments received at the public meetings contributed to the measurement of people's moods.

Whether this concept was true can be assessed by looking at the indicators. First, when the teachers were asked in 2001 if the consolidation appeared to be good for everyone in 1992, eleven of the 13 responded with a positive response. The other two respondents said no or had no opinion. Further, when asked if the consolidation was good for everyone today they responded in the same fashion. Seventy-eight percent or 58 respondents to the parent survey expressed satisfaction with the process during the 1992 consolidation. The same 78% said they were pleased with the arrangement today. Sixty percent of the respondents to the parent survey said they think their child enjoys school. Students replied only slightly higher with 70% saying they enjoy school. Other factors may be involved in these responses. Those who responded with written comments were very positive about the consolidation in 2000.

The mood of people is difficult to assess.. People do not always express their true feelings on surveys. The task force saw the mood of the people to be very positive towards the consolidation. All indications today are that their assessment was correct. The overwhelming majority of people see the consolidation as successful and are happy with the schools today.

The fifth issue the task force considered as it went about its duties in the spring of 1992 was the hurting of students. In the end the task force believed that the students were being hurt by not having the educational opportunities that students in larger districts provided for their students. The number of high school credits, extra curricular programs, materials, and teacher professional development bothered the members of the panel (T. Clay, personal communication,

April 10, 1992). The task force discussed this issue continuously. The media published stories about the lack of student opportunities in Mendon.

The responses of teachers, parents, and students in 2000 indicate that the consolidation solved the task force's concerns. The assessment of this area can be best summed up by the comments of one parent on the survey when she said,

> "It was the best thing to happen to our district as far as our son and daughter were concerned. Our son was in football and loved it and was honorable mention MAC. He was first team MAC in baseball and one of the best catchers in Parkway history. They both made many more friends than they ever could have at Mendon"(N. Painter, personal communication, January 18, 2001).

Some other issues besides the reasons considered by the task force need to be addressed. The teachers who participated in the survey split on whether they thought the Mendon community suffered a loss. Thirty-nine percent said the community suffered, while 46% said it did not suffer a loss. The other 15% expressed no opinion. Parents were split evenly when asked if they thought the quality of life in Mendon decreased in the last eight years. When pressed in personal interviews the only real issue that they could point to was that the Friday night basketball games no longer existed and fewer students patronized the local restaurants. As I survey the town itself eight years after the consolidation, the town has grown in the business area. Downtown Mendon had three restaurants in 1992, today there are four. An antique mall and storage facility were added to the community. The only business to close was a local welding shop which serviced the Mendon buses. This is the only loss in the business area as a direct result of the consolidation (R. Emons, personal communication, February 21, 2001). There are also several housing starts.

The former Mendon-Union guidance counselor, pointed out that "Mendon students have done very well at Parkway"(M. McConahay, personal communication, November 12, 2000). One teacher reported that Parkway suffered because of levy losses since the consolidation. This does not appear to have any merit as levies passed and Parkway passed a levy to buy land to build a centralized school. The Mendon community supported the income tax and land purchase.

One important point that contributed greatly to the success of the consolidation is the fact that one-hundred percent of the teachers responding to the survey said the Mendon-Parkway consolidation was conducted in a very orderly manner. Parents tended to concur with this assessment. The entire process was well-planned and meetings were orderly and productive according to many of the respondents. Those considering consolidation in the future should note this conclusion and make every attempt to have a plan and follow the plan through the process. In the Mendon case it contributed to the success of the consolidation.

The Mendon-Parkway consolidation occurred eight years ago. Its success is evidenced by the attitudes and opinions of the people of the former Mendon-Union School District. This study would be remiss if it did not ask some pertinent questions with regards to why this was the last consolidation and when or if more consolidations will occur in Ohio in the future.

Thoughts on Consolidation in 2000

The state legislature and the Ohio Department of Education have not taken a clear stand on school district consolidation in recent years. This is especially true since the Mendon consolidation. The legislators turned their attention to county offices of education and required county offices to consolidate if they serve less than 8,000 students. The issue of local school district consolidation seems to take a back seat since 1992.

There are 612 school districts in the state during the 2000-01 school year. There are 110 districts with student populations below 1000. If we discount the island schools which would be geographically impossible to consolidate and one district which borders the Ohio-Indiana line that number is reduced to 105 school districts. Taking this number further eight of these districts enrolls less than 500 students. The smallest district, Vanlue Local, enrolls 311 students. This district is merely 24 students larger than the former Mendon-Union District.

It is not possible to know what the legislature or the Ohio Department of Education will do regarding school consolidation in the future. An assessment can be made, however, of whether districts are discussing consolidation.

Superintendents in districts with a population of less than 1000 students participated in a survey in 2000. The responses fall into two groups. One group included those superintendents in districts with a student population of less than 600 students. The other group consisted of superintendents in districts with a student population of 600 to 1000. Nineteen superintendents make up the first group, while there are 86 superintendents in the other group.

Eighty-five percent or 89 superintendents responded to the survey. By group, 68% of the smaller group responded, while 88% of the larger group responded to the survey.

The superintendents were asked whether there were any discussions by any organized group such as board, administration, or PTA, about consolidation of their districts in the past two years. Further this was to include any current discussions. In the larger group, districts between 600-1000, only 13% or 10 superintendents indicated that consolidation was actively discussed in the past two years. Surprisingly only 10% or two superintendents indicated that there were discussions in this group with a population of less than 600. There were not any superintendents

who indicated that there were any current talks about consolidation in the districts. Overall, only 14% of the total respondents admitted to having consolidation discussions in the last two years. In addition to the legislature and the Ohio Department of Education giving no indication of any thought on consolidation the smallest districts in the state are ignoring the issue.

The survey goes further. Superintendents in the state's smallest districts were asked if they thought the size of their districts restricted the educational opportunities of students. Thirty-two percent or 24 superintendents from districts between 600-1000 students indicated they thought their size did restrict the educational opportunities available to their students. Those superintendents in districts with less than 600 students responded quite differently. Seventy-seven percent or 10 respondents said their size restricts opportunities for students. Overall 38% of those respondents in districts with less than 1000 students are bothered by their students' lack of educational opportunities.

There is concern about the opportunities for all students in the state, but especially in the very smallest districts. Mendon-Union students were in this category eight years ago, but have since moved to an area of more educational opportunities.

Summary

The greatest impact of school consolidation is at the secondary level. Secondary practitioners should be aware that students in high school benefit more from consolidation than elementary or middle school students. Major benefits for secondary students are additional course offerings as well as added extra curricular activities. The results of the survey of former Mendon-Union teachers and students help prove this point. The pressure to consolidate is greatest on the secondary practitioner. The pressure felt by the secondary practitioner is due to the fact that the

advantages are more obvious to the general public at this level.

Superintendents in the smallest school districts in Ohio do not appear to be concerned with the issue of consolidation. Since it has not been an issue in education for the past eight years they do not think about this issue. The majority of the superintendents in the smallest districts are not satisfied with the quality and number of programs offered to students especially at the secondary level in their districts. The State of Ohio has done little to promote consolidation of school districts in the past decade.

Are There Other Alternatives?

The current charter school movement needs to be considered as an alternative to school consolidation. Charter schools began in the 1990's as a prominent and controversial school reform issue.

Charter schools by definition are traditional and tap the roots of public education. They provide opportunities based on the idea that competition will enhance education. There is potential for controversy especially in the rural areas (Thomas, 1996).

Charter schools first appeared in Minnesota in 1991. Thirty-two other states and the District of Columbia passed legislation for charter schools since 1991 (Hirsch, 1998).

States have different laws regarding charter schools. Some allow considerable autonomy, while others keep control of the schools. Charter school sponsors range from colleges and state education agencies to teachers, parents and others (Molnar, 1996).

Those who advocate charter schools suggest they tend to be small; are public schools operating outside the establishment; emphasize performance; take creative approaches; stand for something; offer more options; replace failing schools; create competition; and show neither a

logical or demonstrated relationship to increased achievement. They increase competition for dollars and result in a net financial loss to public school districts (Harrington-Luker, 1994).

Research findings suggest that charter schools are not a panacea for rural education reformers. They do, however, work well in small rural areas where the community is cooperative and areas where students are allowed to pursue education alternatives (Thomas).

Many rural areas are resouce poor and have little start-up capital. They lack financial support. Internal conflicts, battles with local and state agencies may also cause charter schools to not be conducive to rural areas (Thomas).

We need to address the question as to whether the charter school movement was an alternative to consolidation for the Mendon-Union District. Charter school legislation was passed in Ohio in 1992. Even if the legislation had been in place when Mendon was considering consolidation it would not have been a very likely alternative for Mendon. The start up capital was not available nor were the funds to operate such a school. Mendon fits the profile of the poor rural area described in the literature. Expanded curricular opportunities for everyone would not have been solved by the charter school concept in Mendon. Charter schools tend to provide special interest curriculum (Harrington-:Luker). The Mendon-Union Schools needed to increase their offerings, rather than narrow them by offering special interest curriculum.

Perhaps as charter schools increase in number and scope, they may someday be a viable alternative to school consolidation. This possibility exists as more research becomes available on this relatively new concept.

What Does The Future Hold?

Ohio has directed its efforts toward the consolidation of county offices of education in the last ten years. There is, however, an indication that the state may be working toward encouraging small school districts to consolidate. In 1997 the legislature established the Ohio School Facilities Commission to provide funding, management oversight, and technical assistance to school districts in the construction and renovation of school facilities. The commission is currently involved in the construction of several school buildings in the state. One of the requirements to receive funds from the commission is that any new building must house at least 350 students. The commission recommends that buildings house between 1200 and 1500 students. Small districts which need to replace buildings may be forced to consolidate with other districts in order to meet the requirements of the commission (Ohio School Facilities Commission, 2001). As a result the future may bring more consolidations throughout Ohio.

Secondary practitioners should assess the programs that are offered to students in their districts. This assessment should be followed by a determination of the ways to improve the number of programs in small schools. As administrators assess their programs and funds become available for construction, consolidation needs to be considered by small districts.

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